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# Straying From the Norm: Which Single Mothers Choose Non-Traditional Last Names for Their Children?

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Straying From the Norm:  
Which Single Mothers Choose Non-Traditional Last Names For Their Children?

by  
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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
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## **Abstract**

By analyzing characteristics of single mothers in the baseline wave of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), I aim to discover which characteristics of single mothers predict their choice to give their newborn children non-traditional last names, or names other than the father's last name. My exploratory study focuses on finding significant relationships to illuminate predictors of mother's surname choices. Initially mother's age, education, religiosity, political liberalness, race/ethnicity, and relationship to the father were analyzed. After analysis, the mother's relationship with the father was found to be the most significant. Compared to mothers who are cohabiting with the father, both mothers visiting and in non-romantic relationships were more likely to choose non-traditional last names. Hispanic mothers were less likely to choose non-traditional last names than white non-Hispanic mothers and mothers who never attend religious services were more likely to choose non-traditional last names than mothers who attend religious services weekly. Using Statistical Package for Social Sciences, or SPSS, I recoded data from the original baseline wave from the FFCWS and performed statistical analysis using binary logistic regression. My exploratory study acts as an addition to a rather new discussion of surname choices as well as the changing of gendered societal practices. Conclusions illuminate the importance of the mother-father relationship in predicting single mothers' surname choice for their children.

*Key Words:* surname, fragile family, gendered practices, relationship status, patrilineal practices, logistic regression, children

## Introduction

Traditional surname practices are significantly gendered. Surname decisions are dominated by the primary practice of the passing along of the father's surname to their children (Nugent 2010). This practice involving exclusively patrilineal surnames stems from and reinforces patriarchal societal practices. Recently however, an increasing number of women have been choosing to keep their birth surname after marriage. This new practice, combined with an increase in divorce, single parents, and LGBTQ+ parenting, have led to different surname practices with both women's and children's surnames (Johnson and Scheuble 2002).

Awareness of these new practices along with understanding the driving factors of non-traditional surname choices are important in striving toward gender equality. Such decisions represent and reinforce ideologies of identity and social/cultural guidelines and are henceforth symbolic (Almack 2005). One's name is part of and steers one's identity. Taking the husband's name correlates with the pattern of households run by the man, as was typical in the past (Goldin and Shim 2004). It is therefore important to uncover how these gendered practices are being broken in today's progressive society.

In my study, I aim to understand predictors of non-traditional surname practices. More specifically, I aim to see what characteristics of single mothers—particularly age, race/ethnicity, education level, religiosity, political liberalness, and relationship type with the father—influence single mothers from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to choose last names other than the father's last name for their newborn children. I will be analyzing the FFCWS dataset with SPSS to show either relationships or lack of relationships between characteristics of single mothers and their choices in straying from traditional surnames for their newborn children.

## Literature Review

With the majority of surname decisions being dominated by patrilineal practices, it is important to understand what drives parents to choose non-traditional surnames for their children that break these patriarchal ideologies. Johnson and Scheuble (2002) found that after the examination of the last and middle names for first-born children to married women, about 90% of women with non-traditional marital surnames still gave their child their husband's surname, illuminating the dominance of traditional gendered surname practices in marriage which become even more gendered in childbearing. After logistic regression, the variables found to be significant predictors for surname decisions for children born to married heterosexual couples were self-identification on political liberalness and the husband's greater education. Women who labeled themselves as "liberal" were more likely to pass their surname to their children than women who labeled themselves as "conservative." Spouses with higher educational attainment correlated with a greater likelihood of including the mother's name in the child's name than those with lower attainment levels. Similarly, a study by Gooding and Kreider (2010) from the 2004 Census Bureau's American Community Survey found that compared to women with less than a bachelor's degree, women with a master's degree were 2.8 times as likely, women with a professional degree were 5.0 times as likely, and women with a doctorate degree were 9.8 times as likely to choose a non-traditional surname at marriage. Gooding and Kreider also found that white non-Hispanic women were least likely of all race/ethnicity groups to choose non-traditional surnames (2010).

Going beyond the scope of married parents, single parents also have to make surname decisions for their children. As noted by the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, these unmarried parents are known as "fragile families" due to instabilities that they face, including

vulnerability of relationships (Reichman et al 2001). As a result of this instability, paternal involvement becomes more varied (Lundberg et al 2007). Given the variation in paternal involvement, we may expect mothers to be less traditional in their naming practices, or choosing last names other than the father's last name, due to less structured and enforced social guidelines (Johnson and Scheuble 2002).

A study by Lundberg, McLanahan, and Rose (2007) utilized the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to focus on the relationship between child gender and father involvement. Variables controlled by the researchers included mother's age, education, and race/ethnicity, as well as whether the child was the first born to both parents. Results revealed an association of gender and father involvement around the time of the birth of the child, with evidence that sons were more likely than daughters to receive the father's surname, particularly when the mother has no other children. At one year after the birth, however, there was not a significant impact of the child's gender on whether the parents live together, the father has seen the child in the last 30 days, or the mother has a new partner. Also, the mother's age and education was found to have a positive association with the likelihood of living with the father and the father having contact with the child. These results demonstrate significance in gender of the child as well as the prominence of traditional surname practices.

The variation in naming conventions parallels research that has been done on lesbian and gay parents' decisions for naming children. Through 20 in-depth interviews with lesbian and gay parent couples who were living together and had their first child together by way of a donor or artificial insemination, Almack's (2005) research asked about the choice of the child's surname as well as reasons for doing so. Results showed a variety of responses. Out of eight different naming patterns, the most common were six couples who gave children the birth

mother's surname, four couples choosing the birth mother's surname with the social mother's surname as the middle name, and four choosing both mother's surnames. Without the strong presence of heterosexual social and cultural guidelines to follow, lesbian parent couples have more room to venture from normative and standardized family practices; however, this does not allow for them to completely ignore such frameworks (Almack 2005).

On a similar note, results from Patterson and Farr's (2017) research analyzing last name choice differences among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples, all who had adopted children, found that 91% of lesbian and gay couple parents had different last names and 82% of heterosexual parents had the same last name. With regard to last names of their adopted children, 96% of children from heterosexual couples had been given their father's last name while 52% of children from same-sex couples were given a hyphenated last name (Patterson and Farr 2017). The results of this research article illuminate other ways naming children can be decided upon when given the opportunity to reinvent boundaries and the nature of naming practices as well as the impact of sexual orientation of the parents.

Further variances and practices have been seen in other countries including Norway and China. Looking at Norwegian women ages 20-44, Noack found that women continue to conform to traditional marital surname patterns, with 80% changing their surnames to that of their husband (2008). The portion of name keepers, or women who kept their surname at marriage, is much higher in Norway than compared to the United States. The increasing number of women with higher education, the high proportion of women in the labor force, and fading roles of breadwinners and homemakers in Norway are illuminated as significant in marital naming (Noack and Wiik 2002). This connection suggests that the level of gender equality in a given society encourages women to keep their surname after marriage.



On the other hand, Qi (2017) discusses how women's rights in China reflect a form of "veiled patriarchy." This practice plays out in terms of naming conventions in that the child's maternal grandfather's lineage is preserved by giving children the mother's surname, thus preserving patrilineal property and associated rights. Strategic surnaming can ensure social and economic standing with the grandfather's family line, therefore showing that it is not about women's rights but patrilineal power. In both Norway and China, surnames illustrate the intersection of politics, legal matters, and social matters.

With regard to little variance in non-traditional surnames, Shafer and Christenson (2018) illuminate the significantly low number of men that make non-traditional surname decisions at marriage. Among the 3% of men who chose a non-traditional surname, those with higher educational attainment were found to be less likely to choose a non-traditional name than respondents with less education. Men with less education than their spouses were also found to be less likely to change their name than those who have equal education as their spouses. As a whole, the significance of education as a factor in name change as well as the prominence in conformity to traditional practices are displayed.

There is repeated evidence of the prominence of traditional surname practices and the significance of political liberalness, education, and relationship status in non-traditional surname decisions (Johnson and Scheuble 2002; Nugent 2010; Patterson and Farr 2017; Lundberg et al. 2007; Ceynar and Gregson 2012). This research is relatively new and remains sparse. Focus lies in either traditional married couples or qualitative measures to discover the reasoning of surname decisions.

Based on this research, a logical step would be to focus research on unmarried couples and characteristics of the parents that are associated with surname decisions. Fragile families

can be seen as breaking outside the norms of marriage and thus possibly outside the norms of surnames. Marriage, and therefore lack of marriage, impacts daily life and decisions through its ties with gender hierarchies, coverture, and economics among many other facts of life (Cott 2000). Thus, surname decisions are likely to be impacted. As a result, it only seems fitting to conduct research with unmarried parents in mind. It is important to encompass all populations to make research inclusive as well as to understand what drives decisions associated with gender empowerment.

### **Research Gap**

This study provides a unique addition to research on surname practices by filling the gap in the research relating to variables that influence mothers' surname decisions. Looking specifically at characteristics of single mothers, there has not been sufficient research as to how characteristics including the mother's relationship with the father, age, race/ethnicity, education, religiosity, and political liberalness influence parent's decision to give their newborn child a last name other than the father's. The resemblance of the work of Lundberg, McLanahan and Rose's article with the FFCWS dataset should be noted here, but with its focus on child gender. As a whole, the entire topic of surnames is a rather new field with little research. Therefore, my exploratory study in itself adds to this growing field to help understand surname decisions.

### **Methods & Data Description**

#### *Sample*

The statistical analysis used in this study uses the baseline wave of the Fragile Families & Child Well-Being Study (FFCWS), a large-scale longitudinal survey that is available to the public (Reichman et al. 2001). The baseline wave consisted of about 4,700 births from 75

hospitals in 20 cities across the United States, all of which have populations over 200,000. Cities and hospitals were chosen by stratified random sampling (Carlson et al. 2004). This study has a greater focus on fragile families, minorities, low-income, and single parents rather than the typical focus on white, middle-class, and married parents.

The overall goals of the FFCWS are to address topics including non-marital childbearing, welfare reform, and the role of fathers. The survey was divided into a number of variables, including mother-father relationships, attitudes toward marriage, education, employment and income, among others. With regard to marriage status, the baseline survey consisted of about 3,600 unmarried and 1,100 married mothers, all of whom were interviewed within 48 hours of giving birth. This supports the survey's focus on single parents and provides consistency in responses. The FFCWS is optimal for this study because of its focus on single mothers in addition to the validity of the survey. Due to its narrow focus, my study is limited to single mothers who gave valid responses. After coding and list-wise deletion, my study has a sample of 3,505.

### *Measures*

The independent variable for my study is child surname. To measure this variable, I used the question: "Will the baby (babies) have the father's last name?" This variable is binary and coded as 0=yes and 1=no. "Yes" responses were translated as choosing traditional surnames and "no" responses were translated as choosing non-traditional surnames, or anything other than the father's last name, for their newborn children. "I don't know" responses were treated the same as missing cases with listwise deletion.

As an exploratory study, I narrowed the variables down to my top six dependent variables of interest of characteristics of single mothers that I believed would have a relationship with their decision to choose a non-traditional last name for their child based on past research. These variables consisted of race/ethnicity, age, educational attainment, mother-father relationship, political liberalness, and religiosity. Race/ethnicity is unordered categorical as 0=white, non-Hispanic, 1=black, non-Hispanic, 2=Hispanic, and 3=other. Age is ordered categorical as 0=0-17, 1=18-25, 2=26-35, and 3=36-45. Education attainment level is ordered categorical as 0=below high school, 1=high school or equivalent, 2=some college, technical school, and 3=college or graduate school. The relationship status variable is coded unordered categorical 0=cohabiting, 1=visiting, and 2=non-romantic. Political liberalness is based on gender attitudes through the mother's response to the statement: "It is better if husband earns the main living and woman cares for family." Responses are coded on a Likert scale with 0=strongly disagree, 1=disagree, 2=agree, and 3=strongly agree. Lastly, mother's religiosity is coded as ordered categorical based on attendance of religious services with 0=attending services one time a week or more, 1=attending services several times a month, 2=attending services several times a year, 3=hardly attending services, and 4=never attending services.

### *Method*

Utilizing the publicly available dataset of the baseline FFCWS, I cleaned, coded, and analyzed the data of child surnames with SPSS. I used binary logistic regression. To account for missing variables and invalid responses, I used listwise deletion. I ran frequencies, cross tabulations, and then binary logistic regression with all of my independent variables in order to see significant relationships with surname decisions. The following results focus on what was generated to be significant.

## Results

The following provides a summary of the descriptive statistics of characteristics of the single mothers from the baseline year of the FFCWS (see Table 1). Of the total respondents, the vast majority, 80.1%, gave their newborn children the father's last name (traditional surname), while 19.9% of mothers gave their newborn children a last name other than the fathers (non-traditional surname). At 54.5%, most respondents are black, non-Hispanic. Of the remaining respondents, 14.8% are white, non-Hispanic, 27.9% Hispanic, and 2.8% are other. With regard to the mother's highest educational attainment, most received less than a high school degree, making up 40.3% of respondents. 33.7% received a high school degree or an equivalent degree, 23% completed some college or a technical degree, and 3% received a college or graduate degree. At 64.9%, the majority of respondents were in the age category 18-25, 3.7% were ages 0-17, 26.2% were ages 26-35, and 5.2% were ages 36-45. The majority, 48.8%, of mothers were cohabiting (living) with the father, 34% were in a visiting (not living together) relationship with the father, and 17.3% were in non-romantic relationships with the father. With respect to religiosity and how often mothers attend religious services, 18.4% attend services once a week or more, 15.2% attend services several times a month, 20.3% attend services several times a year, 29.3% hardly attend religious services, and 16.8% never attend religious services. Finally, in response to the following statement, "It is better if husband. earns the main living and woman cares for family, Agree/Disagree," 17.5% respondents strongly disagreed, 52.7% disagreed, 25.7% agreed, and 4.1% strongly agreed.

Table 2 displays the results of the coefficients from binary logistic regression analysis predicting single mothers' decisions to choose non-traditional last names for their newborn children. When taking into account all of the independent variables, a few characteristics

appeared significant, with most variables being nonsignificant. I analyzed the relationship between the race/ethnicity of the mother and their surname decision for their newborn child. Only Hispanic mothers were significantly different from white non-Hispanic mothers, the reference group. Compared to white non-Hispanic mothers, Hispanic mothers have 0.438 times the odds of choosing a non-traditional surname for their children (statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ ).

Looking at the educational attainment level of mothers, only mothers with a college or graduate degree were significantly different from mothers who have an education attainment less than high school, the reference group. Compared to mothers who completed less than high school, mothers who obtained a college or graduate degree have 0.58 times the odds of choosing a non-traditional surname for their children (marginally significant at  $p < 0.1$ ).

With regard to mother's relationship with the father, mothers who are in a visiting relationship and mothers who are in a non-romantic relationship with the father are significantly different than mothers who are cohabiting with the father of the baby, the reference group. Results revealed that compared to mothers who are cohabiting with the father of the baby, mothers in a visiting relationship have 3.477 times the odds of choosing a non-traditional surname for their children (statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$ ) and mothers in a non-romantic relationship have 22.866 times the odds of choosing a non-traditional surname for their children (statistically significant at  $p < 0.01$ ).

**Table 1**  
Descriptive Statistics

Variable		Frequencies (n)	Percentages (%)
Child Surname	Father's Last Name	2805	80.1
	Not Father's Last Name	698	19.9
Race/Ethnicity	White, Non-Hispanic	517	14.8
	Black, Non-Hispanic	1910	54.5
	Hispanic	979	27.9
	Other	97	2.8
Educational Attainment	Less Than High School	1412	40.3
	High School or Equivalent	1180	33.7
	Some College or Technical Degree	805	23
	College or Graduate Degree	106	3
Age	0-17	128	3.7
	18-25	2274	64.9
	26-35	919	26.2
	36-45	182	5.2
Mother-Father Relationship	Cohabiting	1708	48.8
	Visiting	1190	34
	Not Romantic	605	17.3
Religiosity	Once a Week or More	645	18.4
	Several Times a Month	534	15.2
	Several Times a Year	711	20.3
	Hardly	1026	29.3
	Never	587	16.8
Political Liberalness	Strongly Disagree	614	17.5
	Disagree	1845	52.7
	Agree	900	25.7
	Strongly Agree	144	4.1
Total		3,503	100

**Table 2**  
Predictors of Child Surname for Single Mothers

Variable	Coefficient	S.E.	Exp(B)
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>			
White, Non-Hispanic (ref)			
Black, Non-Hispanic	-0.076	0.144	0.927
Hispanic	-0.848	0.172	0.428 **
Other	-0.273	0.324	0.761
<b>Educational Attainment</b>			
Less Than High School (ref)			
High School or Equivalent	-0.072	0.117	0.93
Some College or Technical Degree	-0.175	0.137	0.84
College or Graduate Degree	-0.545	0.328	0.58
<b>Age</b>			
0-17 (ref)			
18-25	0.017	0.241	1.018
26-35	0.028	0.255	1.029
36-45	0.257	0.318	1.294
<b>Mother-Father Relationship</b>			
Cohabiting (ref)			
Visiting	1.246	0.128	3.477 **
Not Romantic	3.131	0.133	22.886 **
<b>Religiosity</b>			
Once a Week or More (ref)			
Several Times a Month	0.017	0.17	1.017
Several Times a Year	0.03	0.157	1.03
Hardly	0.099	0.146	1.104
Never	0.352	0.161	1.422 *
<b>Political Liberalness</b>			
Strongly Disagree (ref)			
Disagree	0.068	0.134	1.07
Agree	0.137	0.156	1.147
Strongly Agree	0.214	0.267	1.239
Constant	-2.591	0.323	0.075

N=3,503

\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01



Looking at religiosity by attendance of religious services, only mothers who never attend religious services were significantly different from mothers who attend religious services once or more a week, the reference group. Compared to mothers who attend religious services once or more a week, mothers who never attend religious services have 1.422 times the odds of choosing a non-traditional surname for their children (statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$ ).

When looking at the age of the mother, none of the age groups were significantly different from mothers ages 0-17, the reference group. Similarly, when looking at mother's political liberalness by way of gender attitudes, no categories were significant compared to mothers who were the most liberal and replied strongly disagree that it is better if the husband earns the main living and woman lives at home.

Here it should be noted of steps taken not shown or described. In another model, I ran a binomial logistic regression between child's surname (dependent variable) and age (independent variable) looking specifically at the differences between the type of mother-father relationships; however, results yielded no significance. This lack of significance reinforced my decisions in staying in the broader contribution to surname research and not including mediating variables.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Similar to other areas of society, surname choice is a gendered practice with the majority of mothers giving their newborn children the father's last name. As demonstrated by my study, even single mothers conform to the traditional practice of giving their children the father's last name, with only 19.9% choosing non-traditional surnames. I utilized the baseline survey from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to discover what characteristics of single mothers were associated with their decisions in choosing the surname for their newborn children.

As an exploratory study, my end goal was to see if any of the variables I chose, based off of past research on surnames, were significant. My study revealed that a mother's relationship with the father is a significant variable associated with their surname decision for their children. Mothers in a non-romantic relationship with the father were significantly more likely to give their children a non-traditional surname than mothers cohabiting with the father. This significance implies that the less involved the parents are with each other, the less likely the father's last name will be passed to the child. Furthermore, these results have implications of connections between involvement, identity, and naming practices as found in past research.

In addition to parental relationship status, religiosity and race/ethnicity were also found to be significant. Single mothers who never attend religious services were more likely to choose a non-traditional surname for their newborn children than mothers who attend religious services once a week or more. In other words, mothers who are less religious are less likely to conform to traditional surnaming practices. These results suggest that the less mothers engage in traditional practices in one area, the less likely they are to engage in traditional practices in other areas. Additionally, white non-Hispanic mothers are the most likely to choose non-traditional surnames while Hispanic mothers are the most likely to choose traditional surnames. Therefore, race/ethnicity of the mother can be an influential factor in child surnaming choices.

It should also be noted that the mother's educational attainment level generated marginally significant results to reveal it plays a minor role in surname decisions. Mothers with a higher education level were less likely to choose a non-traditional surname than mothers with a lower education level. These results show an education effect is controlling for a politically liberalness effect.

The results from my study support previous findings from research around surnames. My research supports the relationship between sociodemographic factors and naming (Hamilton 2011). Although focusing on marital name changing, Hamilton's study showed a relationship between the demographic variables and surname choice, just as shown in how my results generated significance in race/ethnicity and religiosity. My research also supports the associations between education attainment and naming practices in that results appeared marginally significant (Noack and Wiik 2008; Shafer & Christenson 2018; Hamilton 2011; Johnson and Scheuble 2002; Shafer 2017). Results being marginally significant may be due to the differences in the samples, for the FFCWS focused on lower-income, non-white, single parents whereas, for example, Noack and Wiik conducted their study in Norway where gender equality is more present. The ability for women to obtain higher education has created sparks of change in many areas of society, including the mother's likelihood of breaking free from patriarchal naming practices.

Results of this study should be interpreted carefully due to limitations. The FFCWS is more representative of single, low-income, non-white respondents and is therefore not considered to be nationally representative of all mothers across the United States. Along these lines, the FFCWS did not account for the middle name of the children and therefore some children may still have the mother's surname passed on to them without my data displaying it. Furthermore, as addressed in other studies, there was no mention of lesbian and gay parents in the FFCWS.

As surnames are still a new field of research, there are many implications and areas for growth. My study in particular paves a path to suggest more research focusing on single mothers. There would be value in taking into account the mother's surname history as well as

the newborn child's middle name. With significant results showing associations between parental relationship type and child surname decisions, this research illuminates there are underlying factors in determining the names of children, and therefore calls for more research in the realm of surname practices to find more conclusive and representative results. Although not a characteristic of the mother, I think it would be fascinating to further explore concepts in Lundberg et al.'s (2007) research about the newborn child's gender as a factor in naming patterns to delve more deeply into gender and surnames specifically within the FFCWS. Research has pointed to the importance of identity, both sociodemographic and frameworks, as a role in naming practices and gender attitudes (Nugent; 2010 Patterson and Farr 2017). My research suggests the alternative prominence of mother-father relationships in naming practices and its impact on identity, naming, and children.

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